

Beyond the Rhetoric

Improving College Readiness Through Coherent State Policy

A SPECIAL REPORT BY THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND
HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL EDUCATION BOARD



SREB

June 2010

This brief addresses the state policy dimensions of college readiness. It identifies the key issues and problems associated with the college readiness gap, which is a major impediment to increasing the numbers of college students who complete certificates or degrees. This policy brief also provides governors, legislators, and state education leaders with specific steps they need to take to close the readiness gaps in their states. These findings and recommendations were prepared by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).

The Gap Between Enrolling in College and Being Ready for College

Every year in the United States, nearly 60 percent of first-year college students discover that, despite being fully eligible to attend college, they are not academically ready for postsecondary studies. After enrolling, these students learn that they must take remedial courses in English or mathematics, which do not earn college credits. This gap between college eligibility and college readiness has attracted much attention in the last decade, yet it persists unabated. While access to college remains a major challenge, states have been much more successful in getting students into college than in providing them with the knowledge and skills needed to complete certificates or degrees. Increasingly, it appears that states or postsecondary institutions may be enrolling students under false pretenses. Even those students who have done everything they were told to do to prepare for college find, often after they arrive, that their new institution has deemed them unprepared. Their high school diploma, college-preparatory curriculum, and high school exit examination scores did not ensure college readiness.

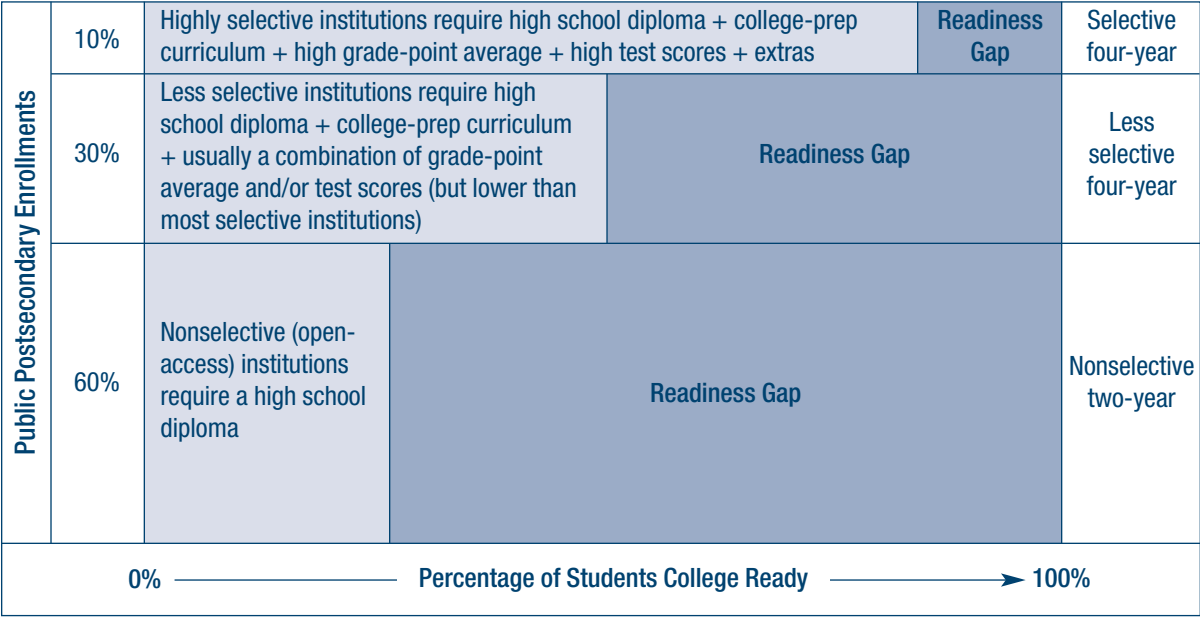
The **National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education** has issued three recent publications on college readiness. *The Governance Divide* explains how the divide between P–12 schools and postsecondary education has grown, as larger numbers of students and more diverse populations are seeking postsecondary education. *Claiming Common Ground* identifies policy tools that states can use to bridge the divide. *States, Schools, and Colleges* finds that P–16 councils are not ideal mechanisms for achieving alignment between schools and college systems, since they usually lack the authority, resources, and capacity to drive a state-level policy agenda.

The **Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)** is working with government and education leaders and with Achieve, Inc., in a number of states to promote policy changes to increase students' college readiness. SREB has developed a model college readiness agenda including six components, all of which must be addressed if state efforts are to be comprehensive, systemic, and effective. At the heart of this agenda is the adoption of specific, statewide college readiness standards that influence classroom instruction from middle school through high school in fundamental ways.

Lack of readiness for college is a major culprit in low graduation rates, as the majority of students who begin in remedial courses never complete their college degrees. As a result, improving college readiness must be an essential part of national and state efforts to increase college degree attainment.

Figure 1 shows the extent of the college readiness problem by portraying the gap between eligibility for college and readiness to do college-level work. Students in public colleges and universities attend one of three types of postsecondary institutions: highly selective four-year institutions, somewhat selective four-year institutions, and nonselective or open-access two-year colleges. The readiness gap is nominal in the most selective universities because their admissions criteria screen out most students who are underprepared. The gap is huge, however, in the other two sectors of higher education, which serve between 80 percent and 90 percent of undergraduates in public institutions.

Figure 1: The Readiness Gap by Institutional Sector



In two-year colleges, eligibility for enrollment typically requires only a high school diploma or equivalency. About one-quarter of incoming students to these institutions are fully prepared for college-level studies. The remaining 75 percent need remedial work in English, mathematics, or both. Eligibility for enrollment in less selective four-year institutions (often the “state colleges”) typically includes a high school diploma and additional college-preparatory coursework. Experience shows that these additional eligibility requirements still leave about half of incoming freshmen underprepared for college. Firm data on the proportions of entering college students who need remediation in English and/or math are not available, but the proportions shown in Figure 1 reflect national estimates.¹ All told, as many as 60 percent of incoming freshmen require some remedial instruction.

These national estimates may be conservative, since not all students who are underprepared for college are tested and placed in remedial courses. The California State University (CSU), a large public

¹ Readiness standards vary widely across states and across institutions within states, which further clouds the meaning of national statistics on remedial rates.

university system, for many years has applied placement or readiness standards in reading, writing, and math that are linked to first-year college coursework. All first-time students at all 23 CSU campuses must meet these standards, principally through performance on a common statewide placement examination. Despite a systemwide admissions policy that requires a college-preparatory curriculum and a grade-point average in high school of B or higher, 68 percent of the 50,000 entering freshmen at CSU campuses require remediation in English/language arts, math, or both. Should the same standards be applied by the California Community Colleges with their open admissions policies, their remediation rates would exceed 80 percent. There is every reason to believe that most states would have similar remediation rates if they employed similar college readiness standards and placement tests across all public colleges and universities.

This huge readiness gap is costly to students, families, institutions, and taxpayers, and it is a tremendous obstacle to increasing the nation's college degree-attainment levels.

Causes of the Readiness Gap

The college readiness gap reflects the disparity between the skills and knowledge that students gain in high school versus the skills and knowledge that colleges and universities expect. In order to understand the causes of this gap, it is important first to distinguish two dimensions of it:

1. The high school diploma–college readiness gap

Earning a high school diploma does not mean that graduates are ready for college. Most states that have high school exit exams or other “high-stakes” tests readily acknowledge that the exams measure proficiency at the 8th- to 10th-grade levels. They are set at this level due to pressures on states and schools to minimize the numbers of students who do not receive a diploma. *No Child Left Behind* has reinforced this tendency, as the law holds states accountable for high school graduation rates irrespective of proficiency levels represented by the diploma. Despite competing pressures to ensure that all high school graduates are college ready, states have found it politically difficult to set high school exit exams at higher levels. It is no surprise, then, that many students who earn a high school diploma and pass the exit exams are far from being college ready.

State leaders are familiar with this *high school diploma–college readiness gap*. Many have observed or participated in debates concerning how high to set the bar for passing high-stakes tests such as exit exams, and they understand that establishing proficiency at 9th- or 10th-grade levels assures that students can graduate from high school without college-level skills. In fact, there are powerful voices in some states that assert that a high school diploma need not indicate college readiness.

2. The college-prep–college readiness gap

It is not so well known that many high school students who fulfill all the college-preparatory requirements likewise arrive at state colleges and universities unprepared. That is, a college-prep curriculum is necessary but not sufficient to ensure college readiness.

Approximately half of the students entering the less selective four-year institutions are not ready for college. Yet these students, for the most part, have completed a college-prep curriculum and have attained the required combination of grade-point average and college admission test scores — in

addition to earning a high school diploma and passing an exit exam. This discrepancy points to a major disconnect between college readiness as defined in terms of course completion, credit hours, and standardized assessment scores, and college readiness as defined in terms of what colleges and universities expect from entering students.

Even a recognized college-prep curriculum does not ensure the development of the critical thinking skills associated with reading, writing, and math that are necessary for college-level learning. These are the fundamental cross-cutting skills needed for college success in all subject areas. And they are skills that college placement or readiness tests expose as insufficiently mastered by most entering students.

Despite the fact that the college-prep curriculum does not ensure college readiness, many state leaders see the college-prep route as the solution to the readiness gap. Many states have established college-prep coursework as the default curriculum and are eager to direct more students to follow it. Because of this discrepancy between the goals of state policy and the limitations of that policy in practice, the college-prep–college readiness gap is perhaps a more important and vexing dimension of the problem than is the high school diploma–college readiness gap. It is readily apparent why a 10th-grade equivalency is not likely to prepare students for college, but why is it that a college-prep curriculum leaves so many students without the learning skills needed for college-level study?

The answers to this question are outlined below, and they collectively point to the need for a more fundamental and comprehensive state policy to improve college readiness.

Why a College-Prep Curriculum Often Leaves Many Students Unprepared for College

1. P–12 and postsecondary expectations are disconnected.

The overarching answer as to why a college-prep curriculum leaves so many students unprepared is that P–12 schools and postsecondary education typically set college readiness expectations independently of one another. There will be a gap between what high schools teach and what colleges expect as long as the two sectors do not develop expectations jointly. Further complicating the situation is the diffuse nature of readiness standards within college and university systems. The placement tests administered by colleges are their readiness standards, but they vary substantially across institutions (even within a state or a postsecondary system), both in the tests and cut-off scores used. Additionally, postsecondary placement tests may bear little connection to the high school curriculum or to high school assessments.

2. Courses and seat time do not guarantee skills and knowledge.

The standards movement in P–12 schools argued against seat time as an indicator of satisfactory high school completion. Seat time, the argument went, does not indicate what a student knows and is able to do. Over the last 15 years, many states have emphasized mastery of specific content and performance standards, as shown through grades and statewide assessments; however, this shift to standards-based performance in the schools generally has not been extended to higher levels of achievement associated with college readiness, whose indicators still focus on courses taken. The

flawed assumption has been that if students take the right courses and earn the right grades, they will be ready for college. The flaw in this logic is perhaps best illustrated by contrasting the typical 12th-grade English curriculum with the typical entry-level college English class. The former stresses literature, while the latter stresses expository reading and writing, the key skills needed to learn in most college courses.

While many states have made progress in getting more students to take the high school courses necessary for college readiness and have strengthened the content standards in these courses, only a few have specified an explicit set of performance skills in reading, writing, and math that signify college readiness. The emphasis has been on courses taken and knowledge gained, which is necessary and appropriate. However, equal emphasis must be placed on integrating the development of higher-level learning skills in the curriculum, specifically in reading, writing, and math. Hopefully, the development of Common Core State Standards for college readiness in reading, writing, and math will provide a basis that highlights and emphasizes these skill-based standards.

3. Traditional readiness assessments do not measure college readiness.

College-bound students enrolled in a college-prep curriculum are advised or required to take standardized assessments such as the ACT, PSAT, and SAT to gauge their readiness for college. Some states have set college readiness standards in terms of cut-off scores on these standardized tests. Standardized tests are valued for their ability to predict college success. But most of these national tests do not measure student attainment of specific college readiness skills because, for most states, explicit readiness standards have not been developed, and, for the few states that have begun to develop readiness standards, the tests have not been tailored to the state's specific curriculum and standards. P-12 teachers focus primarily on their state's standards, curriculum, and assessments.

Generic national assessments of college readiness are not connected tightly enough to the state curriculum. Unless those assessments reflect the specific readiness skills in reading, writing, and math that have been adopted across P-16 in each state, there is no assurance that helping students score well on those assessments will help them become college ready.

4. Schools and teachers are not accountable for teaching to college readiness standards.

In the absence of college readiness standards, teachers have no reliable guides to focus their teaching directly on helping students attain college readiness. Instead, they can try to get students to perform well on the assessments that are used by their school or state. But unless those assessments reflect the specific readiness skills in reading, writing, and math that have been adopted across school and postsecondary systems, there is no assurance that helping students score well on those assessments will help them become college ready. Most standardized assessments are not very useful for helping teachers diagnose which college-ready skills students may be lacking, so that they can tailor the curriculum or their teaching methods accordingly.

Additionally, state high school accountability systems need to emphasize the importance of increasing the percentages of students who are college ready. Too often, accountability applies only

to students meeting minimum standards. States should hold high schools accountable for increasing the percentages of their graduates who enroll in college prepared to take college courses.

5. Colleges are not accountable for degree completion.

Most state accountability and finance systems do not monitor or incentivize college completion. Greater emphasis by states on accountability of higher education for completion rates would encourage colleges to join public schools in systemic and comprehensive efforts to articulate, monitor, and improve college readiness skills in reading, writing, and math.

State Readiness Efforts Are Not Directed at the Causes of the Readiness Problem

Most states are actively working to improve college readiness. Many have the benefit of assistance from Achieve through participation in the American Diploma Project. Other national and regional organizations are helping states, including the National Governors Association (NGA), the College Board, ACT, and the Southern Regional Education Board. Many states are also engaged in the effort to develop Common Core State Standards as a basis to improve readiness and postsecondary attainment. All of these efforts are welcome, as the nation faces difficult challenges if it is to once again lead the world in college degree attainment, as President Obama has proposed. The prevailing approach, however, is not directly addressing the causes of the readiness gap outlined above.

Common Shortcomings of State Readiness Efforts

Postsecondary education has not been sufficiently involved, leaving P–12 schools with unclear messages about the knowledge and skills required for readiness.

Readiness standards, when set, are set too low and are based only on courses, with insufficient emphasis on the reading, writing, and math skills that enable students to learn at successively higher levels.

Efforts have been piecemeal rather than systemic and have not affected classroom teaching and learning.

State accountability structures do not contain incentives to achieve college readiness outcomes.

States are often stymied in their efforts to address the high school diploma–college readiness gap by a set of intractable issues that are based in deeply held philosophical and educational values. In state after state, efforts to increase the level of proficiency required for exit exams or high-stakes, end-of-course exams have been delayed or rebuffed. Faced with what appears to be a choice between substantive college readiness standards and acceptable high school graduation rates, state leaders feel great pressure to not set standards so high as to drop high school graduation rates even lower than they are currently.

However, the dichotomy between substantive college readiness standards and acceptable high school graduation rates is false — and with political courage and proper messaging, state leaders can make that case. For example, states could set college readiness standards that are higher than the minimum requirements for a high school diploma. A college readiness designation could be included on a student's high school transcript, or it could be signaled to colleges in other ways. By taking this approach, states can send clear signals about college readiness and can set targets for the hard work ahead to close the gap.

Many states have taken steps to strengthen the course-taking aspect of college readiness, requiring or encouraging students to take a college-prep curriculum. Few states, however, have succeeded in reinforcing the higher-level course approach with an equal emphasis on skill development. Where states have attempted to define college readiness as proficiency standards for

reading, writing, and math, the standards are usually too general. They lack specificity with respect to content and especially with respect to specific performance-level expectations (that is, cut-off scores that specify how well students are expected to perform on each standard). Such specificity is needed to provide an explicit link between statewide school curriculum and college readiness standards, so as to influence classroom instruction. Nothing substantial will change unless classroom instruction is affected.

The lack of integration of key learning skills within the college-prep curriculum is primarily responsible for the lack of progress in improving college readiness, even among students who have completed the prescribed and recommended courses. Few states have taken the steps needed to assure that reading, writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills are explicitly incorporated throughout the college-prep curriculum, from English and mathematics to science and social science.

Finally, current efforts in the states to strengthen college readiness do not fully recognize the need to make P–12 and postsecondary education equal partners in the readiness agenda. Many states still view the lack of college readiness as a problem best addressed by P–12 schools. For a high school course of study to yield college-ready graduates, however, both P–12 and postsecondary education must be in complete agreement about explicit readiness standards. Moreover, the two sectors must have a shared stake in success, as measured by the share of high school graduates enrolling directly in and succeeding at college-level courses. Without a shared stake, postsecondary institutions can use lack of readiness as an excuse for their own low graduation rates. Currently, no state accountability system provides incentives for the two sectors to work together to deliver these outcomes.

Components of a Model College Readiness Agenda

1. Readiness standards
2. Assessments
3. Curriculum
4. Teacher development
5. College placement
6. State accountability

Moving State Agendas Forward: A Comprehensive and Systemic College Readiness Agenda

Public P–12 schools and postsecondary education are complex systems. When they need to function together so that students can transition smoothly from one system to the other, the complexity multiplies. Systemic readiness reform can be accomplished only if all of the system components that affect what teachers teach and what students learn are in place and are coordinated around mutually understood statewide college readiness standards. These components include the standards themselves and the application of the standards through teacher preparation and training, high school assessments and curriculum, college placement, and state accountability systems that reward readiness in both sectors. P–12 and postsecondary education must work together to integrate these various parts of the system.

Initiatives to articulate common state college readiness standards can be an important force in developing consensus around higher, deeper, and more specific skill standards in reading, writing, and math. A systemic college readiness agenda depends on the presence of a statewide set of readiness standards, developed and implemented by schools and colleges, that are the basis of a comprehensive action agenda.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) — which, along with the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, is issuing this policy brief — has developed a model statewide readiness agenda for accomplishing these systemic linkages across the various components of reform.² The model agenda is summarized below.

1. College readiness standards must be formally adopted by P–12 and postsecondary education.

First and foremost, state leaders must recognize that defining college readiness exclusively in terms of courses and seat time is not a productive approach. In addition to requiring college-prep coursework in high school, states must adopt specific college readiness standards for English/language arts and math. These performance standards must be set to true college readiness, even though that will likely be higher than minimum diploma requirements for at least the short term. Setting these standards will require full and official participation of the postsecondary sector, not only the participation of individual faculty as consultants or nominal representatives of these institutions. Standards should be adopted for reading, writing, and math — the cross-cutting, fundamental building blocks of knowledge for all other disciplines. The standards should be clearly linked to state content standards and should be based on skills and competencies, not on high school course titles. They should be limited in number and specific in addressing both what students are expected to know and how well they are expected to know it. States must validate these standards by comparing student performance on the standards to actual performance in introductory college courses.

Defining college readiness in terms of courses and seat time is not a productive approach.

2. High school assessments must measure progress on the specific state-adopted standards.

In order for school-administered assessments to help high school teachers learn how well students, individually and collectively, are attaining readiness skills and knowledge, the assessments must directly measure student performance on readiness standards. Based on such assessments, teachers can tailor instructional methods and/or curriculum to address identified deficiencies. End-of-course exams that are tied directly to a state's readiness standards are well suited to this purpose and are being adopted in several states. Not as well suited are standardized tests, at the state or national level, that are not linked explicitly to state-specific curriculum and standards. The assessments associated with the Common Core State Standards may present another option for assessing students' development of reading, writing, and math-related skills across subject levels and grade levels. The exams should be used to direct students into curriculum that is targeted to help them attain readiness, as identified by the standards, by the end of high school. This is particularly important for assessments of 11th-graders that can help target intensive instruction in the students' final high school year.

² A detailed explanation of the SREB readiness agenda can be found in Chapter Three of *States, Schools, and Colleges: Policies to Improve Student Readiness for College and Strengthen Coordination Between Schools and Colleges* (San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, November 2009), available at: <http://www.highereducation.org/reports/ssc/index.shtml>.

3. Public school curriculum should reflect the specific statewide readiness standards.

Standards and assessments are means to the end of improving teaching and learning. Once the readiness standards are adopted, the curriculum should be modified as necessary, starting at least as early as 8th grade, to embed an explicit focus in each course on the development of reading, writing, and math skills that enable learning at the college level. Of particular importance is the development of supplemental curriculum in the 12th grade to help students who, based on 11th-grade assessments, are not on track to be college ready. These senior-year courses could consist of one- or two-semester classes, modules, or tutorials (offered in-person or online), and they should closely reflect the reading, writing, and math skills that are featured in college introductory courses.

4. Teacher development should address the effective teaching of college readiness standards.

The achievement of a readiness agenda depends on effective teaching of readiness standards. Teachers can be effective only if they understand the standards, if they know the standards are featured in assessments, and if they are trained appropriately to use the standards. Accordingly, state in-service and pre-service teacher development should focus specifically on the state's readiness standards and how to teach them in grades 8 to 12, both in terms of content and level of performance. Colleges and universities that offer teacher preparation must become fully engaged in this aspect of the readiness agenda. Teacher development must help teachers: construct and adapt courses to address the standards; relate their materials, lessons, and assignments to the standards; design course assessments to ensure shared performance expectations; and identify instructional strategies that are effective in teaching the standards. These elements of teacher development are especially important for teachers of 12th-grade supplemental readiness courses.

5. Placement decisions by colleges and universities must use the adopted readiness standards.

An overlooked but critical element of systemic college readiness reform is the process by which colleges and universities determine whether students need remediation or can be placed immediately into college-level introductory classes. Since most states allow postsecondary institutions to conduct placement on their own terms, the colleges and universities, in effect, set their own readiness standards through their decentralized decisions about placement assessments and cut-off scores. It is not uncommon for different placement tests to be used, even within a single college system. This hodgepodge of assessment practices sends confusing messages to high schools and their students about the skill sets needed for college success and can thwart otherwise strong state efforts to establish readiness standards. The statewide adoption of common assessment practices across broad-access colleges and universities represents a step forward, but systemic reform will be accomplished only if public schools use the very same standards. Only this will ensure that students who meet their high school's college readiness requirements are indeed college ready.

6. State accountability systems must create incentives across P–16 for college readiness and completion.

Despite all the emphasis on accountability in P–12 and postsecondary education, states do not hold either sector accountable for improving college readiness. P–12 schools are accountable in part for high school graduation rates, but this can work against including robust readiness standards within the requirements of a high school diploma. Postsecondary institutions are increasingly being held accountable for their graduation rates, but the expectations to which they are held are often lowered to make allowances for underprepared student populations. States should adjust accountability provisions to: (a) hold P–12 schools accountable in part for the portion of high school graduates who are college ready (that is, based on the standards and assessments described in items 1 and 2 above); and (b) hold postsecondary education accountable for participation and support of college readiness, and for increasing the proportion of remedial students who transition into college courses and the proportion of all students who complete college programs. Postsecondary education must be accountable for achieving these gains in readiness and completion while maintaining access to college. States should not allow this readiness agenda to be achieved by reducing college access.

Keeping the Focus

College readiness is a complex issue that has dimensions beyond those discussed in this policy brief, including pedagogy, data systems, dual enrollment, and educational finance. While these areas are important, we have focused on those issues where we believe the nation is best poised to make meaningful gains and where we believe our collective experience can add value to the work under way across many states. (See Figure 2.) We intend for this recommended agenda to complement states’ other initiatives and the other sources of information from which they draw.

Figure 2: The Scope of the Recommended State College Readiness Agenda

Instrument of Change:	State policy
Target Audience:	Governors, legislators, state education officials
Institutional Focus:	P–12 and broad-access postsecondary institutions
Target Population:	High school graduates eligible but not ready for postsecondary education
Readiness for What?	Two- and four-year degree programs, including career-oriented programs
Focus of Standards:	Reading, writing, and mathematics
Meaning of “Readiness”:	Academic aspects of readiness only
Validation of Standards:	Alignment of high school testing with postsecondary placement tests and introductory college courses
College-ready Benchmark:	Success in introductory college-level courses

The National Center and SREB work regularly with governors, legislators, and education officials, and we believe that state policy is a powerful tool that these leaders can use to improve college readiness. The changes we recommend must be statewide. Regional partnerships and institutional innovations, however valuable, cannot substitute for state-level policy in producing fundamental changes in teaching and learning across a state. While it would be ideal for the entire postsecondary sector to partner in the readiness effort, it is best for leaders to focus on obtaining the full support of two-year and less selective four-year sectors. Participation of these sectors is far more important, since they serve the vast majority of students, and should be easier to obtain, as they are generally more subject to state policy intervention than are selective research universities.

The nation's education priorities include getting more students to stay in high school and graduate, but the agenda we recommend is not primarily a high school reform agenda. Rather, it is aimed at decreasing the gap between college eligibility and college readiness. Further, there are other issues to be researched and resolved about appropriate pathways and standards of readiness for students who choose postsecondary options other than degree programs, including certificate programs, the military, or apprenticeships. Our purpose is to build on the growing research consensus that there is a common set of readiness standards for entry into postsecondary degree programs, whether they are associate's, bachelor's, career-oriented, or traditional academic programs. As that consensus has developed around reading, writing, and math skills, which we consider the fundamental building blocks of knowledge, we advise states to limit their focus, at least initially, to developing readiness standards in those areas.

At this stage, states need to ensure that the readiness standards in reading, writing and math are sufficiently rigorous to predict success in first-year college classes. Moreover, these standards must be applied to all degree programs in all post-secondary institutions. At the same time, we urge postsecondary education to research empirically the applicability of these standards to readiness for non-degree programs and to apply them in those areas as well, if relevant.

Finally, we limit our advice to the academic aspects of college readiness, knowing full well that there are many other factors that contribute to a student's readiness to engage successfully in college study. Accordingly, the measure of success, if states adopt our recommended readiness agenda, is greater academic success of students in introductory college-level courses.

The National Center and SREB acknowledge the work that states are doing, many with the assistance and support of organizations such as Achieve, the National Governors Association, the College Board, and ACT. But there is a danger that state leaders will declare victory prematurely. A recent Achieve survey reported that 31 states have defined college readiness standards. But we know of only a few in which higher education has recognized and applied those precise standards on a statewide basis. Equally important, no more than six states have translated their readiness standards into specific performance-level expectations with school assessments based on the statewide readiness standards. Even fewer states have strengthened school accountability systems to measure, report, and emphasize improvements in college readiness. Finally, few states are developing comprehensive approaches to ensure that both practicing and prospective teachers are prepared to teach to college readiness standards.

A systemic college readiness agenda is not another task to add to these other responsibilities. It is an organizing framework, or policy infrastructure, to help states manage the changing world of public education.

This is a challenging and unsettled time for education policy. Within severely constrained budgets, public officials and education leaders are laboring to keep up with new federal policies aimed at improving P–12 and postsecondary education outcomes while continuing to work on school reform efforts at many levels, including the development of first-ever common state competency standards. A systemic college readiness agenda is not another task to add to these responsibilities. It is an organizing framework, or policy infrastructure, to help states manage the changing world of public education.

These findings and recommendations were developed collaboratively by the Southern Regional Education Board and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. The members of the project team for this collaboration were Patrick Callan, Joni Finney, Michael Kirst, Nancy Shulock, David Spence, and Michael Usdan. Nancy Shulock is the principal author of this policy brief.

It is urgent that states reconsider, renew, and refine their reform efforts. The dire financial conditions of most states make it even more critical that states integrate their efforts into coherent and cost-effective strategies to strengthen college readiness, reduce the costs of remediation, and improve rates of college completion. With most states in the initial stages of building effective statewide college readiness initiatives, it is timely to encourage states now to step up and strengthen their college readiness agendas. The Common Core State Standards Initiative should assist states in focusing public schools and higher education on college readiness standards and incorporating them in high school assessments and college placement tests.

Taking Responsibility for College Readiness: A Checklist

Governors should:

- ✓ Call for legislation that sets forth a framework for a comprehensive and systemic college readiness agenda
- ✓ Ensure that a P–16 council (if one exists) is charged to develop and advocate for a comprehensive and systemic college readiness agenda
- ✓ Communicate often and clearly about the importance of setting college readiness standards that truly signal readiness
- ✓ Set clear expectations that the broad-access postsecondary sectors (all two-year and less selective four-year institutions) work as equal partners on a college readiness agenda
- ✓ Ensure that readiness standards are adopted as a core component of state P–12 standards

Legislatures should:

- ✓ Develop and pass legislation that sets forth a framework for a comprehensive and systemic college readiness agenda and assigns clear responsibility for its implementation
- ✓ Set clear expectations that the broad-access postsecondary sectors (all two-year and less selective four-year institutions) work as equal partners to establish and implement a college readiness agenda
- ✓ Revise accountability requirements to hold P–12 and postsecondary accountable for increasing the numbers of college-ready high school graduates

P–12 boards should:

- ✓ Adopt, as a subset of content standards and in full partnership with postsecondary education, specific college readiness standards for reading, writing, and mathematics that set forth skills, knowledge, and performance levels that students need to succeed in entry-level college courses in two-year and four-year degree programs
- ✓ Adopt assessments that measure the acquisition of the specific skills and knowledge set forth in the adopted readiness standards
- ✓ Adopt changes to teacher preparation and teacher in-service to ensure that teachers are trained to help students reach the college readiness standards
- ✓ Oversee the development of curricular changes to improve college readiness, with a strong focus on new curriculum in 12th grade targeted to areas of identified need

Postsecondary governing boards should:

- ✓ Implement mechanisms for all broad-access postsecondary institutions to partner with P–12 education in the development of college readiness standards
- ✓ Adopt the college readiness standards officially
- ✓ Adopt one set of placement instruments and benchmarks across the broad-access sector that reflects the college readiness standards adopted by P–12 and postsecondary boards

Postsecondary coordinating boards should:

- ✓ Monitor the use of placement instruments and standards in use across the broad-access sector and work toward consistent use of placement regimens that reflect the state's college readiness standards
- ✓ Develop accountability metrics for monitoring changes in: the proportion of entering students who are college ready; the proportion of remedial students who transition to college-level studies; and the level of postsecondary access provided by these institutions

Symposium Participants

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Southern Regional Education Board acknowledge with appreciation the participants in a December 2009 symposium convened to review an early draft of this policy brief.

Julie Davis Bell
Program Director
Education Program
National Conference of State
Legislatures

Cheryl Blanco
Vice President, Special Projects
Southern Regional Education Board

Pamela Burdman
Senior Project Director
WestEd

Patrick Callan
President
National Center for Public Policy and
Higher Education

Michael Cohen
President
Achieve, Inc.

Richard Colvin
Director
Hechinger Institute on Education and
the Media
Teachers College, Columbia University

Ronald Cowell
President
The Education Policy and Leadership
Center

Glen Dubois
Chancellor
Virginia Community College System

Virginia Edwards
Editor and Publisher
Editorial Projects in Education
Education Week

Peter Ewell
Vice President
National Center for Higher Education
Management Systems

Joni Finney
Practice Professor
Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania
Vice President
National Center for Public Policy and
Higher Education

Stan Jones
President
Complete College America

Harrison Keller
Vice Provost for Higher Education
Policy and Research
The University of Texas at Austin

Steve F. Kime
Retired President
Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges

Michael Kirst
Professor Emeritus
School of Education
Stanford University

William E. Kirwan
Chancellor
University System of Maryland

Sandy Kress
Senior Counsel
Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP

Paul Lingenfelter
President
State Higher Education Executive
Officers

James E. Lyons, Sr.
Secretary of Higher Education
Maryland Higher Education
Commission

Michael Nettles
Senior Vice President
Educational Testing Service

Joe E. Pickens
President
St. Johns River Community College

Richard G. Rhoda
Executive Director
Tennessee Higher Education
Commission

Judith Rizzo
Executive Director and CEO
James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute
for Educational Leadership and Policy

Nancy Shulock
Director
Institute for Higher Education
Leadership Policy
Professor
Public Policy and Administration
California State University, Sacramento

Janis Somerville
Staff Director
National Association of System Heads

David Spence
President
Southern Regional Education Board

Michael Usdan
Senior Fellow
Institute for Educational Leadership

Brenda Welburn
Executive Director
National Association of State Boards of
Education

William Zumeta
Professor
Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs
University of Washington